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ABSTRACT: Community asset transfer enables local groups to own or manage a government owned facility and related services. For critics, it is merely an extension of roll-back neoliberalism, permitting the state to withdraw from welfare and transfer risk from local government to ill-defined communities. The paper uses quantitative and case study data from Northern Ireland to demonstrate its transformative potential by challenging the notion of private property rights, enabling communities to accumulate and creating local consumption circuits. It suggests that asset-led social enterprises are entangled in a mix of pro-market and alternative economic strategies which are necessarily traded off each other in the reproduction of social value. There is not an ethically pure form of asset transfer but the tactical adaptation of different modes of working, including the enhancement of state services as well as more independent forms of economic and social organisation. However, the analysis points to the political weaknesses of three specific projects and in particular, the lack of corporate working that has limited their reformist potential. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications for more progressive forms of social economics and the skills, finance and practices that facilitate local accumulation strategies.

Key words: assets; regeneration; legislation; deprivation; social enterprises; community.

Introduction

The depth and global character of the 2008 recession revealed the fundamental instability of deregulated credit and weakening controls over property development (Harvey, 2012). For Polanyi (1944, 2001) finance and land are 'fictive commodities' that do not and cannot, exist in a real sense as produce, to be valorised and traded. They, as well as labour, represent the extent to which the market degrades nature, erodes the human soul and exploits money in ruinous and ultimately self-destructive ways (Berndt and Boeckler, 2010). But, Polanyi also argues that these processes would set off what he termed a 'double movement' in which society would resist the disembedding logics of capitalism in favour of a more socially responsive and responsible relationship between markets and places. This paper evaluates the potential of community asset transfer as an arena to both challenge such disembedding practices and to create alternative modes of accumulation and economic organisation. This inevitably entangles social enterprises with the market, money and ethics and the paper suggests that this, in turn, creates the need for a distinct set of skills, resources and relationships, especially to negotiate through state restructuring in more progressive ways.

In the UK, new social finance products, impact bonds, intermediaries and procurement rules aim to support the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of a range of social care programmes, work integration schemes and critically, a right to take over failing services operated by local authorities (Bailey, 2012). The Localism Act (2011) enshrined: a Community Right to Challenge local service providers; a Right to Buy failing facilities; and a Right to Build through expanded Community Land Trusts (Aiken et al, 2011). The nature of these 'rights' is contested and for some, the whole policy thrust is about welfare displacement, shifting social risks to the local and offloading expensive parts of the public sector estate (Boland, 2014). However, asset transfer also offers some of the most disadvantaged communities a chance to acquire, control or generate surpluses from property in their neighbourhood. Social enterprises have engaged their own accumulation strategies, mimicking the private sector and manipulating state resources to pursue equity objectives and for advocates, social enterprises with collateral have the capacity to disrupt and even resist a rapidly neoliberalising state (Mauksch et al, 2017).

This research evaluates the social and economic significance of assets transferred by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), including land, commercial property and houses, to the community sector on various terms from short lease agreements to outright ownership. Northern Ireland lacks the political, policy, legislative and financial backing for asset transfer now established across Britain but the Housing Executive has completed nearly 270 schemes in some of the most disadvantaged and divided areas in the region. The re-formation of the Northern Ireland state in response to various forms of crises in the early 1970s produced a significant architecture of 'collective consumption', especially social housing, which has endured the effects of Thatcherism and early roll-out neoliberalism in Britain (Shanks and Mullins, 2016). But there is still uncertainty about what role asset transfer schemes perform and how reformist they are, not least in the polarising politics of Northern Ireland. For Mayer (2013, p.12) the risk is that 'the appropriation of movement principles such as self-management, self-realization and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity has become not only easily feasible but a generative force in today's neoliberalising cities. These movement principles have lost the radical edge they used to entail in the context of the overbearing Keynesian welfare state - in today's neoliberalism they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub local regeneration'. However, Mayer does not offer much in the way of evidence to show how co-option works in practice and it is too simplistic to position asset based social enterprises as part of a compliant sector unaware of its relationship with changing markets or uncritical of the inevitable compromises.

The Housing Executive left its own ‘overbearing’ imprint in a weak record of public participation, a failure to meaningfully engage the effects of religious segregation and a lack of attention to poverty on its estates (Shanks and Mullins, 2016). However, as Saunders (1996) argues, collective consumption provides a more responsive arena for neighbourhood politics and the retention of significant institutions in social housing has enabled local accumulation, democratic forms of control and the expansion of the social economy (Bratt, 2012). The paper argues that asset based social enterprises are important for precisely the same reasons that property is significant to developers and speculators. Inevitably, this involves engagement with state and private markets but both are critical to the reproduction of alternative neighbourhood economies, local circuits of wealth distribution and more stable community organisations. Some social enterprises are co-opted and perform a range of regressive functions but they are also tactical and even manipulative in order to secure the necessary legitimacies and resources to scale their social impact.

The next section reviews the politics of the social economy and especially the part of social enterprises in neoliberal roll-out, state retrenchment and tactics of resistance. This sets the context for an analysis of Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland arguing that there is no single form of pure resistance but an engagement in which ‘increasing appropriation and exploitation of local cultures and environments might lead to resistance’ in various forms, including the valorisation of use value over rent value from community owned assets (Novy and Colomb, 2013, p.1834). Using data from housing-led transfer schemes in Northern Ireland it suggests that these are economically significant by generating valuable (if highly localised) production, consumption and exchange as well as leveraging new services, wages and spending in the neighbourhood. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the weak corporate nature of the sector and its inability to mount a coherent political project around social economics. This is made all the more difficult by the neoliberal tendencies in the Northern Ireland state, not least in dismantling infrastructure, such as social housing in favour of private finance, deregulation and corporate tax incentives. How the sector can extract political capital from such arrangements, avoid or manage state capture and steer social economics in ethical and solidaristic ways, is a more fundamental challenge facing asset transfer and the sector more generally.

The scope for alternative economics

The recent policy interest in social enterprises and their role in community asset transfer has created a wider debate in the literature about where the third sector is going; who is driving change and why; and what are the implications for its ethics, particularly in delivering services previously associated with local government (Amin, 2009). This literature certainly sees the social economy at the forefront of neoliberalism but it also identifies spaces and practices that are capable of resisting rollout strategies. This section makes three points. First, the social economy cannot simply be interpreted within a neoliberal framework or reduced to a purely resistive stance as it is, itself, variegated, locally responsive and embodies multiple practices including *some* that are bound up in state restructuring processes. Second, the emergence of the shadow state has created multiple responses from resistance and refusal to more tactical engagements with public and private markets in order to access resources, assets and capital. Third, these alternatives are not exclusively shaped by resistance and the literature on faith based social enterprises, for instance, shows that they respond to a different set of organisational rationalities, networks and values that are not always related to the shadow state.

Harvey (2012, p.253) is especially critical of non-governmental organisations actively ‘engaging in the privatisation of state welfare functions or fostering institutional reforms to facilitate market integration of marginal populations’. Neoliberalism has rolled-back the state and rolled-out marketized forms of welfare delivery, privatisation and deregulation, especially in property and finance (Peck and Tickell, 2002). However, as Purcell (2009) stressed, it does not travel evenly but is path-dependent, institutionally specific and locally contingent. This lack of uniformity and the incompleteness of disembedding processes open significant opportunities for alternative practices that have embraced a range of ‘transformative non-economic economic geographies’ (Lee 2010, p.281). Gibson-Graham (2006) describe a set of *post-development* practices in which proliferate and variegated economic activities sit outside price controls and market-based exchange. Non-monetized trading, gift making, unpaid housework and the social economy demonstrate the diverse and complex modes of exchange that might resist capitalist formations, especially at the local level. Here, the social economy is significant specifically because it involves trading of goods and services for profit but it uses surpluses, not to reward investors, but for social good. These can then be reinvested to support the charitable or ethical mission of the organisation as well as to strengthen business performance (Laville, 2015). The sector is also characterised by strong democratic ownership of enterprises in that control is not in the hands of individual shareholders but is distributed across a wider collective of members and stakeholder interests. Business formats have different characteristics than limited liability companies in that risk is limited by guarantee and assets are locked for community rather than private benefit (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). Just as neoliberalism is rolled out in path-dependent ways so too is the social economy as it is inflected by different national economic conditions, cultures and institutional histories (Kerlin, 2012). Quandt et al (2017) point out that in Latin America, cooperative solidarity models have their roots in liberation theology whilst in eastern Europe a legacy of centralised state control has pushed social enterprises toward hybrid, semi-commercial forms. Defourny and Nyssens (2010) also describe the important differences between corporatist northern European models of the social economy; a stronger independent charitable character to Mediterranean countries; and an emphasis on entrepreneurship and enterprise in the US and UK. In other words, some social enterprises are close to the market, others work in partnership with the state but some are capable of maintaining independence from both (Aiken et al, 2011).

However, it is also clear that the sector is being reordered in the context of state restructuring processes, particularly in the balance between its service and solidarity functions (Wheeler, 2017). Hackworth (2007) argues that the community and voluntary sector in the US has been professionalised in order to deliver welfare and social repair functions but is now only weakly associated with political activism. It has, he argued, been reshaped and disciplined as governable terrain to enable the ‘extension’ and ‘enhancement’ of market logics to public service provision. The sector may have played a role in lubricating the shift from roll-back to roll-out neoliberalism but for Graefe (2002), such a path is not inevitable. He has identified an alternative scenario that involves a return to traditional social democratic modes of government in which community enterprises work in partnership with the state to deliver a range of more specialist services. However, such corporatism keeps the sector at the borders of retreating welfare and confines activity to a narrow set of functions predetermined by policy imperatives. Thus, for Graefe (2002, p.250), the social economy only finds full expression by ‘mobilising resources within communities and by building new solidarities’ that politicise the local and radicalise communities' ability to control the resources that shape their everyday lives.'

Trudeau (2012, p.442) argues that such freedom is increasingly constrained in the, albeit incomplete, processes of restructuring, especially the form of the *shadow state,* in which 'nongovernmental organizations working under state contract ultimately act as sites of state articulated regulations and control, which implement neoliberal agendas.' The transfer of assets and responsibility for integrative functions to the local, simply expands the influence of pro-market ideologies and reduces the scope for radical action, resistance or strengthening genuine forms of community control. However, Trudeau's analysis of three NGOs involved with migrants to the US, revealed a more complex set of relations between civic society, citizens and governance opportunities. Certainly, there is evidence that some voluntary organisations are 'translation mechanisms' through which state restructuring is deployed particularly in processes of individualisation and responsibilisation (Trudeau and Veronis, 2009, p.131). However, others have enabled more culturally appropriate services that retain the dignity of migrant identities and which resist their re-construction around a narrow version of distinctively American citizenship. In such programmes, citizens are capable of forming ideas and acting on identities not inscribed by legal rules and obligations but which are actively made in everyday lives and shaped by their own cultural reference points. In order to create and maintain this independence, Panelli and Larner (2010) advocate 'timely partnerships' in which state-activist alliances may encourage more effective practices but also enable connections to be made with other issues, institutions and spatial scales. 'Less clear-cut divisions between state and activists now exist and more messy and contingent interactions (and temporally legitimized opportunities) have unfolded and been explicitly recognised as an integral part of political processes' (Panelli and Larner, 2010, p.1360). New ‘community brokers’ are emerging with the skills to both resist and educate state officials in more meaningful engagement processes.

This normative complexity is illustrated in the range of tactics open to activists, shaped by their responses to coercive state deployments. Prior (2009) argues that NGOs can revise, resist or refuse the authority of the state and the identities they attempt to impose via contractual relationships. Similarly, Darby (2016) draws on a Community Asset Transfer scheme in inner-city Leeds to argue for ‘dynamic resistance’, which means staying close to the state (to access resources, facilities and skills) but acting reflexively by constantly checking the implications of decisions against organisational values, group interests and other funding stakeholders. However, such a focus sees the social economy responsively (co-opted by the state or reacting against it), rather than as a more independent arena of community action and experimentation. Williams et al (2009, p.1488) point out that Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) are shaped by a distinct set of ethics but adopt a range of tactics that ‘FBOs often adopt the imitative or mimetic behaviour of “successful” organisational solutions and structures, presenting themselves as professional and “fit partners”, while maintaining values and practices “on the ground” that retain a capacity for performative subversions of official government strategies’ (Williams et al, 2009, p.1488). They show that many FBOs simply avoid or refuse contracted services and the compromises they imply. Moreover faith-motivated activity can enable ethical politics from *within* and where their values coincide with state interests, they can lever preferential programmes, resources and influence.

Cloke and Beaumont (2012) make the point that this type of work has shaped a resurgent post-secular ethics for the city by delivering social care, drawing attention to poverty and by crossing-over theological, ideological and humanitarian boundaries to defy right wing urban policies and politics. Such social movements (which include homelessness, fair-trade and migrant rights) are not intellectually exclusive or doctrinal but aim to build radical 'spaces of action' via disciplinary rapprochement and a shared commitment to tackling exclusion and injustice (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012, p.44). Moreover, these alliances are not necessarily particularist or essentially local but can connect to global issues including immigration, climate change and ideas about citizenship (Ballie-Smith et al, 2013). The ideological and institutional heritage of the main churches in Northern Ireland has been important in incubating social enterprises, cooperatives and credit unions and whilst many projects have secularized, they often remain loosely connected to an incidental set of specifically Christian values and ethics (Brewer et al, 2011).

However, Williams et al (2009) stress that the independence of such social action is, in part, determined by the tactical capacity to balance competing logics and processes. Similarly, Di Domenico et al (2012) identified strategies of effectuation whereby social entrepreneurs, by necessity, envision a range of development options that involve ethical comprises and opportunistic tactics to create competitive *social* value. Whilst this is a risky approach 'it is also liable to be more efficient because entrepreneurs following it are able to change track more easily in response to changing circumstances and to take advantage of new resources' (Di Domenico et al, 2010, p.684). In changing track, enterprises must, by necessity, negotiate different and potentially contradictory legitimation strategies. Here, Dart (2004) argues that entrepreneurs need to achieve 'social pragmatic' legitimacy by exchanging a service or facility for monetary value through a grant or contract usually from the state. However, this also brings isomorphic pressures to change the organisation in a way that preferences the commissioner. The most resilient social enterprises are those that can resist such pressures and activate 'moral legitimacy' to steer the organisation in order to avoid a deeper legitimation crises:

> The moral legitimacy perspective frames social enterprises not merely as something that earns revenues or achieves outcomes but as something that is a preferred model of organisation … the moral legitimate social enterprise activists remain relatively immune from performance-based criticism and delegitimation (Dart, 2004, p.419).

It is the use, not the creation of surplus from an asset that is vital in debates about its worth and moral and pragmatic legitimacy are thus in constant tension because they are also inseparable. Harvey (2012, p.22-23) argues that the right to the city is simply exercised through 'greater democratic control over the production and use of surplus. Since the urban process is a major channel of use, then the right to the city is constituted by establishing democratic control over the deployment of the surpluses through urbanisation'. He goes on to claim that 'to have a surplus is not a bad thing' but that it needs to be 'brought under democratic control' (Harvey, 2012, p.23). The struggle for democratic control makes Northern Ireland particularly interesting, not least because of the complex relationship between communities and the state, the nature of neighbourhood and place identities and because the local has been an important site of economic experimentation and more explicit forms of violent resistance. However, as the literature emphasises, the state certainly has the capacity to align social enterprises with shadow state objectives but this is neither universal nor irresistible. Moreover, as some of the sector specific studies have shown, social enterprises and other forms of civic action (such as around faith ethics, migration or asset management) can operate independently of state and market discipline. The value of such empiricism is that it reveals the modalities, tactics and contradictions in the everyday struggles of social enterprises and attempts to assert their relative independence. Where this literature is especially useful is calling for a focus on these realities and in particular, the scope of assets to re-embed land and property rights in the social networks, community interests and local economies.

Asset transfer and social economics in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland conflict (1969 to 1998) expressed competing constitutional claims between: Catholics, Nationalists and Republicans who broadly wanted the reunification of the island; and Protestants, Unionists and Loyalists who preferred to remain in the UK. The conflict left 3,532 people dead and 47,541 injured and hardened pre-existing territorial boundaries, especially in Belfast, where 99 physical barriers or *interfaces* now separate the two communities (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). However, post-conflict transition has been characterised by a degree of economic modernisation and social mobility and at the same time, the spatial concentration of poverty, deepening segregation and even violence linked to surviving paramilitaries (Knox, 2016). Certainly, there have been new jobs, increased inward investment in finance and high growth technology sectors and growing visitor numbers. However, the effects of these shifts have been spatially selective with high value labour and housing markets, especially in south Belfast, strengthening religious mixing in middle-class neighbourhoods in parallel with deepening segregation in inner-city communities left largely untouched by the peace economy (Murtagh, 2010). The toxic mix of poverty, sectarianism and segregation presents distinctive challenges, especially in state-community relations under the period of Direct Rule as well as in the uncertain processes of devolution with the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998.

The Assembly achieved a degree of consensus about the value of neoliberal policies as somehow, a signifier of peace, as it agreed a range of measures to reduce public sector dependency and strengthen a more enterprising economic culture. It also enthusiastically embraced privatisation, agreed a reduced rate of Corporation Tax by 2018 and enacted sustained cuts in public spending, including the social housing programme. The Housing Executive was significantly downgraded by reducing its budget, ability to use receipts from house sales and by transferring its development responsibilities to housing associations (Shanks and Mullins, 2016). The policy on *Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland* (DSD, 2013) was especially weak in comparison with other national models as the government argued that there was little evidence that legislation worked although, remarkably, it did not state what evidence or what laws it had considered. The policy proposes no new investment programmes, dedicated social finance or support beyond the previously funded Development Trust Northern Ireland (DTNI).

In the absence of such support, an alliance of social enterprises, charitable foundations and philanthropists assembled their own infrastructure and for some, the lack of political or state involvement was vital in securing an ethical and independent future for asset transfer in the region. In 2011, the Building Change Trust (BCT) and the US based Atlantic Philanthropies invested £1.5m to capitalise Charity Bank, a community finance organisation operating in Northern Ireland, in order to strengthen lending to social enterprises. The two organisations have also partnered to deliver an Investment Readiness Programme at Ulster University in order to provide a technical assistance programme to support charities and community groups to develop social enterprise models and upscale asset transfer. This focus on the enabling environment and whether it is capable of helping organisations to resist incorporation into neoliberal forms of asset transfer is however, contested both conceptually and empirically.

Research methodology

Maas and Grieco (2017) argue that part of the problem with the social economy is that insufficient attention has been paid to the dynamics of enterprises and how they achieve change and at the same time, reconcile their social and commercial objectives. It is too conceptually read as either universally virtuous and heroic or condemned as hopelessly co-opted by a manipulating state. Their work calls for a closer inspection of not just what social enterprises achieve but how they go about the task of reconciling interests, scaling their work and using resources, including assets, in more creative ways.

This section is based on quantitative and qualitative data held by the Housing Executive on the assets they have transferred to community groups across Northern Ireland. The first part provides a summary of the scale and spatial distribution of assets and emphasises their spread across religious and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The second part examines three larger social enterprises where tensions between competing logics are most evident and which represent disadvantaged neighbourhoods across Belfast. Data gathering consisted of an evaluation of the finances and organisational documentation of each case, supported by 14 in-depth interviews with project management staff and board members. The cases are selected to reflect these environments including a mainly Catholic community in the north of the city (Ashton Community Trust); a mainly Protestant community in the east (Hanwood Trust) and an interface community (Suffolk Lenadoon Interface Group) who have redeveloped one of the peace lines in west Belfast.

Assets and their management

In order to set the context of the case study discussion, table 1 describes the scope of housing based asset transfers and shows that these fall under three broad areas:

1 Housing, usually to community and tenant groups at nil or peppercorn rent;
2 Commercial property, which is more limited and of variable quality but has made a significant contribution on larger area based regeneration schemes; and
3 Land transfer of full legal title at nil or nominal value to community groups for a range of functions.

Table 1 shows that 34 commercial properties have been transferred, half of which have been used as facilities for a range of community groups, women's organisations and environmental projects. The table shows that most land transfers have been to develop a community facility or play area, although there is a significant number of environmental initiatives.

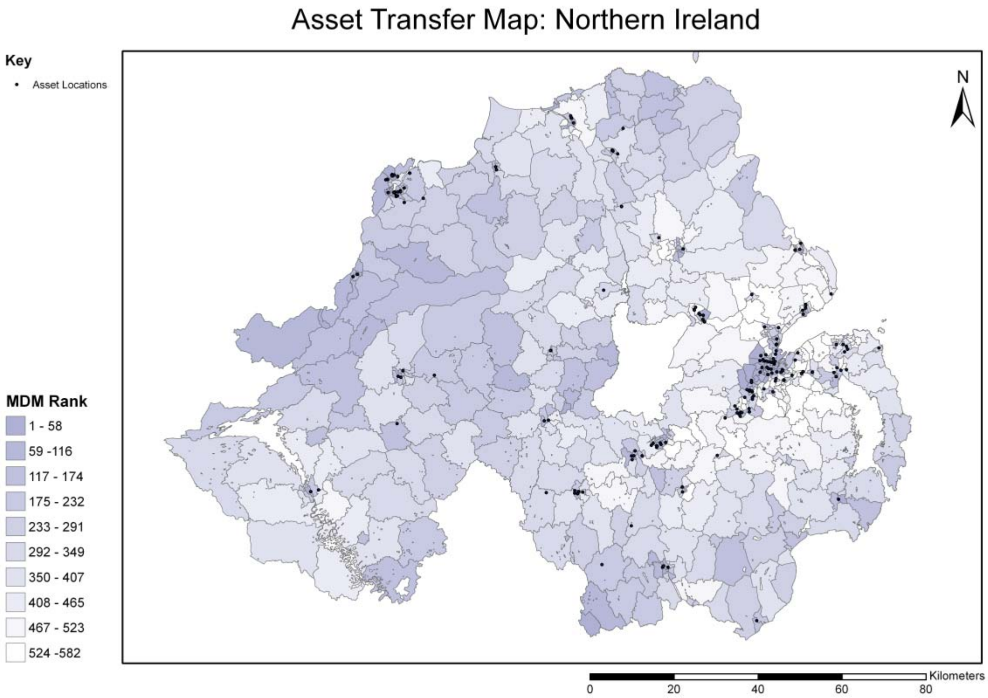
Table 1 A profile of asset transfers by the NIHE

Sector	Number	Percentage
	Commercial facilities by function	
Community facility	18	51
Information and advice	2	6
Local enterprise	3	9
Playgroup/crèche	3	9
Health	3	9
Training and education	3	9
Young people	3	9
Total	**34**	**100**
	Land transfers	
Regeneration	3	13
Play	4	17
Landscape	6	25
Facility	8	33
Sports	1	4
Allotments	2	8
Total	**24**	**100**
	Community houses	
Community development	262	82
Children	17	5
Young people	9	3
Housing	6	2
Health	6	2
Women's group	5	2
Education	5	2
Voluntary	4	1
Religious	2	1
Ethnic minority	2	1
Family support	2	1
Total	**320**	**100**

There are 320 residential *units* transferred for community use, although services on estates use more than one unit, so there are 209 *projects* in total across Northern Ireland. Table 1 shows that 8 out of 10 projects are used primarily by a local community group usually involved with neighbourhood development, training or environmental improvements. This data also shows that beneficiaries cluster around demographic groups including young people, children and women as well as ethnic minorities.

Of particular concern to critics of localism is the uneven distribution of wealth, austerity and community capabilities (North, 2011). Mohan (2012) pointed out that only 6% of 'core' volunteers live in the most disadvantaged areas; there are over 2.5 times as many neighbourhood organisations in the most prosperous neighbourhoods compared with the most disadvantaged; and third sector organisations operating in the most disadvantaged places are the most vulnerable to spending cuts. Hastings et al (2013, p.3) also show that 'cuts in public spending are systematically greater in more deprived local authorities than in more affluent ones, with a difference of around £100 per head in both England and Scotland'. The diagram below describes the distribution of community houses by the level of multiple deprivation (MDM) in the 582 wards in Northern Ireland. It demonstrates the concentration of schemes in mainly urban areas with comparatively few projects in rural locations. More importantly, it illustrates a strong correlation with the level of social deprivation across the region. Only 10% of community asset transfer projects in England were in deprived areas but 54% of community houses are in the top 20% disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland (NVCO, 2010).

Figure 1 Community house by Multiple Deprivation Measures (MDM) rank



The spatial distribution of community houses by the *Community Background* is set out in table 2. This shows that there is a significant number of projects in mainly Protestants estates, with 42% of all transfers in electoral wards where more than 70% of the population is from the Protestant Community Background. The table also shows that there are more assets in mainly Catholic neighbourhoods but there is a higher concentration of disadvantaged estates in Catholic wards. Of all Housing Executive community houses transferred, 30% are in Catholic concentrated wards (with a population of more than 70% Catholic). However, when the spatial distribution of Catholic and Protestant transfers is correlated, it produces a coefficient of 0.75 (1.0 would be a perfect fit) indicating a high degree of similarity in the distribution across community area.

Table 2 Community houses by the distribution of Community Background

Community Background as a % of ward total (number of wards in category in brackets)	**Number of asset transfers**	**%**
Protestant Community Background CB		
0% – 10% (83)	41	20
11-20 (37)	17	8
21-30 (36)	7	3
31-40 (44)	19	9
41-50 (43)	11	5
51-60 (48)	11	5
61-70 (55)	14	7
71-80 (61)	26	12
81-90 (106)	35	17
91-100 (69)	28	13
Total	**209**	**100**
Catholic Community Background CB		
0% – 10% (128)	50	24
11-20 (76)	28	13
21-30 (51)	14	7
31-40 (49)	19	9
41-50 (48)	7	3
51-60 (40)	13	6
61-70 (39)	16	8
71-80 (32)	5	2
81-90 (40)	20	10
91-100 (79)	37	18
Total	**209**	**100**

Whilst the projects may be evenly distributed across communities, they are also generally small, not connected to each other or with people and places of a different religious background. The Housing Executive launched the *Building Reconciliation in Communities (BRIC)* Programme as part of embedding cohesion and peacebuilding objectives into its range of planning and regeneration programmes. The three case studies show that for some this was at the margins of their work but for others it offered an opportunity to reshape socio-spatial relations across some of the most segregated and violent parts of the city.

Ashton Community Trust

The Ashton Community Trust (ACT) is one of the largest social enterprises in Northern Ireland and operates across the north side of inner-city Belfast. The local church was important in helping to organise a Community Share offer in which 720 shares, valued at £35 per share, were issued to enable the group to generate the initial capital to develop a small enterprise centre. This provided a form of pump-prime funding, gave the community a material stake in the organisation and showed commitment and self-confidence to resource further developments. The mainly Catholic neighbourhood is one of the poorest in the UK, is stratified by 40 peace barriers and suffered more per-capita deaths during the Northern Ireland conflict than any other area. It is also mainly Republican, with historically strong support for paramilitaries and disaffection from the British state, its bureaucracies, politicians and even finance (Knox, 2010). Gibson-Graham (2016) recently observed that it is contexts of disaster in which ‘diverse economic practices of mutual assistance and reciprocity were, and still are, deployed to re-establish livelihoods.’ Crises, not state restructuring, internal competition for legitimation (between the church and paramilitaries) and a necessity to organise outside a mistrusted government all encouraged a form of community politics and economic organisation which like, neoliberalism, ‘are hybrid from the outset’ (Castree, 2003, p.3).

Over time, the organisation built up resources primarily from rental income to develop a new multi-purpose facility that provides childcare, community services and ground floor retail units. The land was transferred at community value rather than full market price and grant aid from the EU URBAN Programme provided capital to build the centre. ACT has a number of interlinked programmes including: Kinderkids child care; a community arts initiative; Bridge of Hope conflict healing and counselling programme; New Lodge youth centre; an education, training and employment programme; and a FABLAB. The FABLAB is one of a number of global digital fabrication workshops (which started at Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and delivers training and schools programmes as well as consultancy services. ACT is considering a hybrid private business but part owned by the social enterprise, to promote start-up tech companies, develop training contracts for the software sector and to offer prototype and product testing services on a commercial basis. Access to capital and more risky forms of equity is a particular challenge to this type of growth but the organisation feels that such support is critical in scaling ACT, its finances and its social impact. A Board member stated that ‘If we are going to go anywhere we need to move on from here (the north Belfast market) … to do it, we need cash and money with as few strings as we can get. Our constitution is about serving our community but we can do this and at the same time make ourselves stronger (financially).’ The attempt to achieve scale, move beyond the local and the potential loss of the project’s inceptive qualities, are all bound up in the need to access capital and the means to manage and repay debt finance.

ACT currently employs 159 people and pays out £2.9m in salaries per annum and of this, 61% (£1.76m) stays in north Belfast and 60% (or £1.74m) in the top 20% deprived neighbourhoods in Belfast (EDT, 2016). In 2014/15 ACT had assets worth £2.78m, including 10 properties and an operating profit of £1.18m (ACT, 2015). Part of the strategic approach has been to strengthen local multiplier effects and prevent leakage in the value chain, especially in supporting shops, services and specific programmes delivered by ACT. In the last financial year, ACT has enabled 260 people to access work and more than 600 have received some form of qualification. Again, the Programme Manager is aware of the ethics of work integration programmes but highlights the importance of a career to the 'dignity and self-respect of young people … when youth suicide is one of the biggest killers in north Belfast'. Programme managers are also aware of the way in which a mixed economy of activities inevitably creates ethical tensions and they adopt an explicitly utilitarian stance on their portfolio, precisely because it aims to achieve social outcomes. 'Some of these activities are the tax we have to pay to do what we want … of course it isn't that clean but it can't be and we take our people with us to make sure we meet their needs' (ACT Programme Manager). This mix of legitimacies is reflected in the way in which surpluses have been used to fund 22 bursaries to local community groups; an arts programme that involved 1,500 children; and counselling services to 6,000 individuals from the Bridge of Hope programme. Bridge of Hope was set up in 2001 to provide services to victims and survivors of the Northern Ireland conflict and has developed into a wider initiative dealing with suicide prevention and counselling, especially for young males. It has also created a transitional justice programme, which helps ex-paramilitaries reintegrate into the community, find employment and become involved in peacebuilding programmes, especially at the interface.

ACT has recently established a separate social enterprise, the Ethical Development Trust (EDT) as a partnership with the Queen's University and *LEDCOM*, another large asset based social enterprise, in order to expand its approach beyond north Belfast and traditional market sectors. The EDT is investing £1m in start-ups, with a focus on high growth sectors as well as developing asset based projects to the next level of growth over a three-year period. Part of the funding has supported formal contacts, visits and exchanges with social enterprises networks in Bristol and the Basque Country to look at models of organisational development, integrated working and market growth in areas where the sector is well embedded. ACT has accrued significant reserves from its various businesses but sees EDT as vital in its search 'for the next generation of social enterprises … that will inevitably mean establishing structures that have to look outside north Belfast' (ACT Board Member). The Director also argues that such accumulation strategies are an inevitable extension of asset transfer and in a depressed market place, the EDT can help to 'buy cheap and get good developments that create a profit'. The organisation realises that its capacity to grow and scale social value is limited by the local nature of its operation. The development of hybrid business formats for the technology sector and partnerships with the university and complementary social firms illustrate an alternative assembly of supports to strengthen market growth. The 'local trap' and privileging the neighbourhood as an economic scale has constrained the ethical effects of ACT.

Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project Limited (SRRP)

The Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project (SRRP) is a cross-community social enterprise, which was established in 2000. The £1.5m redevelopment scheme transformed a derelict site located on a west Belfast interface between Suffolk (a Protestant estate with a population of about 900 people) and Lenadoon (a Catholic area with a population of about 8,000 people).

The interface was characterised by high levels of multiple deprivation, community division and anti-social behaviour, especially between young people on the Stewartstown Road, which runs between the two housing estates. Contact between the communities began in the mid-1990s by two women's groups concerned about road safety and their campaign (including a joint sit-down protest) eventually resulted in a new pedestrian crossing and related traffic calming measures. The contacts, confidence and skills they gained enabled a degree of trust and reciprocation and some momentum in identifying shared needs and planning priorities. The gendered nature of the work is significant as the groups explored a range of actions including: the regeneration of a derelict block of shops and flats owned by the Housing Executive and which effectively formed the peace line; opportunities for women to return to work; and initiatives to take young people away from interface violence. The first proposal, to regenerate the derelict shops, was facilitated by the transfer of the property and related land to the community, provided appropriate governance structures could be established. This led to the creation of complex partnership arrangements involving the establishment of separate Community Forums formally linked to SSRP, which is managed by a Board of SSRP consisting of four representatives from each Community Forum, four politicians and four independent directors.

More than half the finance for the phase 1 development (£475,000, 52%) came from the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), with £260,000 (29%) from the EU PEACE Programme and the smallest proportion (£168,000, 19%), from the Northern Ireland government. This phase opened in 2001 and despite intimidation from Loyalist paramilitaries, community leaders broadened the approach around the concept of a *Peacebuilding Plan* supported by an American donor, the Atlantic Philanthropies. The Plan set out the principles governing the use of shared space, the need to respect the other's identity and the issues, especially housing, which would not form part of the proposals as a Forum worker explained:

> We could not have done this (the asset development) without the Peace(building) Plan. It's what got people on board and got rid of "who would get the housing" (Community development worker in the Suffolk Forum).

The Plan also attempted to maintain legitimacy, especially among the demographically vulnerable Protestant community and strengthen the partnership, constantly threatened by paramilitaries, themselves threatened by an emerging class based alliance. The Plan informed Phase 2 of the project which involved the development of a 50 place childcare facility and two further retail units. Nearly 24,000 square feet of floor space now provides 12 new services, more than 90 jobs and nearly £200,000 in rental income per annum. SRRP is financially sound, holding £1.7m worth of assets and over £200,000 of unrestricted reserves to reinvest in new projects. Activities on the complex has created £1.47m per annum in salaries, 82% of which are in the neighbourhood economy, which in turn supports the services in the main complex. SSPR generated a £99,800 surplus in 2014 and under its governance rules, one-third of the profit was retained by the company and one-third was allocated to the Suffolk and Lenadoon Forums respectively (SRRP, 2014). This supported community development projects, which reflect what the Director calls 'the everyday concerns of residents in both areas'. For example, it funded an advice service on the implications of welfare reform and how to maximise entitlements; 20 bursaries to a university access programme; and cross-community youth contact scheme in local schools.

Larner (2014) rightly criticises readings of social enterprises within purely managerial logics, stripped of their ideology and unwittingly co-opted in the service of an instrumental state. Rather, they are complex ethical formations in which dialogical processes allow ideas and techniques to 'travel within and across different social networks' and become embedded in diverse organisational forms and practices (Larner, 2014, p.195). The Peacebuilding Plan has enabled ideas, people and proposals to *travel across* deeply divided places and create networks to agree how to develop the asset, park issues that are likely to derail progress and create services that meet local needs. Knox (2010) showed how incidence of violence at the Suffolk interface fell from an average of 30.1 per month in 2001 to just 0.6 per month in 2004 but more importantly that inter-community attitudes have improved (less so for young people), that the facilities are accessible and well used and that contact across the peace line had increased. The area is different and the complex of shops, services, cafes, jobs and advice organisations have created, what Wilton and Evans (2016) called, 'spaces of encounter', precisely because social enterprises are relational places that operate beyond the merely functional.

Hanwood Centre, East Belfast

The Hanwood Centre is located in the east Belfast and was built in four phases on six acres of land transferred by the Housing Executive, with a notional value of £2m in 2008. Phase 1 included the development of office space, meeting rooms, a credit union and an IT suite to deliver courses with the regional technical college. This also enabled the organisation to extend its intermediary labour market and focus on the employability skills of young people in particular. Phase 2 involved the development of the Hanwood Business Park with 25 self-contained units offering office, retail and light industrial uses, all powered by solar panels. The Park has 19 units occupied and employs 88 people, with the majority of lessees coming from the neighbourhood and most are start-up private businesses. Phase three included the development of a sports centre and a community gym and the final phase aims to develop a filling station, supermarket and four retail units.

The Hanwood Centre has developed a distinctively commercial approach and has a comparatively light governance structure and weak consultation systems or formal links with neighbourhood groups. This, the manager feels, has enabled them to operate more freely, especially in the commercial market and to remove the organisation from the influence of local paramilitaries. In 2015, the Handwood Centre had assets worth £3.4m and a turnover of £243,000, which is an increase of 12% since 2014. The credit union offers an important alternative to pay-day loans and money lenders but the economic or community development effects in the neighbourhood are limited. The large number of highly localised, undercapitalised credit unions, often serving separate Catholic and Protestant markets, underscores the fractured nature of the social economy and why it struggles to scale its work financially as well as politically. Hanwood, as with the other projects, does not network with the wider sector, the manager is critical of the environment for skills support and lobbying and is preoccupied with maximising occupancy and rental incomes. A community development worker noted that 'We do this on our own (and) .... have to work it out as we go along. There is no manual and we get next to no support from the (community and voluntary) sector'.

The scheme is managed by a Board of 12 directors including 4 community workers and 4 local councillors as well as statutory and business sector representatives. A specific cross-community project was implemented in 2011 called *Sport Us Together* aimed at helping young people understand other cultures, religions and migrant groups. This was funded by the Housing Executive's BRIC programme and brought together 30 young people from a range of backgrounds to develop a greater understanding and acceptance of different religions through the medium of sport. The centre also provides a venue for conflict transformation initiatives, especially with Loyalist paramilitaries and it was one of the first housing estates in Belfast to remove sectarian wall murals. However, tensions with paramilitaries and in particular extortion and drugs, remain a problem on many Loyalist housing estates, especially for community groups attempting to work outside the discipline of such structures (Shirlow, 2012). A board member pointed out that it has not always been easy to manage relations with paramilitaries in the area, their influence on young males and the uncertainty this sometimes creates for local businesses. Here, the contradictions and material challenges facing diverse economies and their managers take on a distinctly sinister character. The isomorphic pressures are not simply between the state, the market and the social but also from within the complex morphology of poor and disaffected communities where criminalisation and paramilitarism offer realistic options for the most marginal.

Conclusions

These are only three examples of Community Asset Transfer and because they operate in a particular geographic and social context, their implications for state-voluntary sector relations are highly contingent. But, as Larner (2014) points out, all social economies and their response to neoliberal processes, have idiosyncratic qualities and need to be diagnostically understood, rather than being read off a post-political script. This is not to invite 'militant particularism' but serves to understand the diversity, scope and space on which social enterprises organise beyond the reach of neoliberal states and markets. The three case studies demonstrate, whether intended or not, re-embedding practices by bringing assets under some form of community control (certainly making them more locally useful), using a blend of grant, community share and debt finance to recycle money in the local economy and provide jobs, not just in low skilled work but also in attempts to create social enterprises in high-value sectors of the labour market. Even collectively, they do not alter the relationship between land, labour and finance in the modern economy. Disembedding strains are always present but they do show that it is possible to renegotiate these relations at the local level.

None of the projects emerged or developed to restore or transmit neoliberal ideologies and nor were they coerced by resource dependency to deliver punitive welfare policies. As Hackworth (2012, p.141) acknowledged, social enterprises can simultaneously enact 'parallel processes and ideas (that) challenge, morph and sometimes blatantly contradict a purely neoliberal project.' Some have challenged sectarianism and segregation and others continuously face down paramilitaries, intimidation and extortion. Indeed, the Hanwood Centre and SRRP are separately preoccupied with managing legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict and are content to consolidate their finances, not least in a volatile property market. ACT acknowledges the limits of the local and is creating alliances with other social enterprises, better evidence and a commitment to learning nationally and internationally. They have used the EDT to evaluate successful social enterprise markets and create formal links with the sector in Bristol and the Basque Country where the cooperative economy is highly developed and socially, as well as spatially, embedded (see Larner 2014; Morgan, 2016).

Whilst their origins might be in geographies of need and sustaining local legitimacies, ACT for one, sees its future in a broader assemblage of knowledge, finance and collaboration with asset-based enterprises outside the neighbourhood. The organisation also see the potential of hybrid forms of private-social businesses, equity finance and high growth technology sectors in ways that loosen its local moorings and engage the modalities of accumulation and capital ‘growth’. This, in turn, raises ethical questions about where the social economy is going and what its role will be in the context of distinctly local post-conflict conditions as well as dealing with the environmental and social effects of global neoliberalism. As Peck et al (2010) note, neoliberalism has attempted to infect nearly everywhere and everything in its viral spread but it does not always succeed and the double-movement, shaped by the destructive commodification of land, money and labour, has created diverse and proliferate responses.

Proliferation is itself, partly dependent on the struggle for the ownership and control of property, money and work and using assets and finance to replicate the social use of surplus is an important arena for activism and learning. Asset transfer can be progressive or regressive or simultaneously both and managers are well aware of the compromises and trade-offs involved. Property rights are an important site of urban politics and who owns land and buildings, what they do with them and who benefits from their use value, underscores the need to engage property in a material and actually existing sense. Developing collateral, acquiring the skills to manage and sustain it, creating solidarities with other asset holders, leveraging finance, calculating risks, learning globally and confronting public and private markets and their disembedding tendencies are vital for ACT and the ethics of the social economy more broadly. The projects are not connected to each other and nor are they corporately integrated as a distinct sector capable of building meaningful economic alternatives beyond the neighbourhood. This, in turn, has implications for social enterprises and how they can scale up and out as a political as well as an economic project. There is a lack of skill and a degree of individualism (the heroic entrepreneur) about how they are led and managed. Diffusing skills in the use of finance and management, business planning, risk assessment and market growth are critical components of the resistance, altery and progressive community development. Advocating for legislation, social value in public contracts and especially preferential forms of finance is the everyday work of political mobilisation in social economics. These can extend marketization but they can also open access to resources, assets and skills to enable accumulation for distinctly social outcomes. Part of such an agenda also involves the development of systems, governance rules, data and capacity to evaluate the ethics of these choices, the price to be paid for some exchanges (running failing or debt laden facilities) and how to manage what is socially legitimate as well as financially viable.

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